DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 757 CS 207 476

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TITLE Characteristics of Students' Classroom Talk Surrounding the Assignment, Production and Evaluation of a Writing Task.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 35p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Observation Techniques; Communication Research; Feedback; Instructional Materials; Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; *Language Usage; *Oral Language; *Student Behavior; Teaching Methods; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Processes; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

A study analyzed some of the characteristics of junior high students' oral communication behavior that accompanied the assignment, production, and evaluation of a writing task. It involved fieldwork in three junior high school English classes--first in a six-month pilot study and then in a year-long period of observation. Through direct participant observation and interviews with students, four functions of oral communication in written composition were identified. These functions reveal the following patterns or clusters of communication behaviors: (1) expressing self through language, (2) seeking confirmation through validation of writing, (3) evaluating one's own writing, and (4) assimilating the writing task to one's own understanding. An evaluative theme appeared in many of the patterns of students' classroom talk and involved their seeking an audience and feedback for their writing. Another characteristic was their sensitivity toward their language use. Often an interaction occurred between students' concern for evaluation and their sensitivity to language use. In such instances, the students encountered a dilemma. To seek an audience and feedback for one's writing required that one allow the writing to become the focus of another person's attention and judgement. Other students, also faced with a desire to share their communication effort but mindful of the self-revelatory nature of their work, took pains to direct their audience's attention to specific parts of the writing. Unfortunately, there appears to be a discrepancy between the frequency and spontaneity of students' sharing behavior and the lack of provision for, or emphasis of, this dimension in current composition materials. (HOD) .

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CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS' CLASSROOM TALK SURROUNDING THE ASSIGNMENT, PRODUCTION AND EVALUATION OF A WRITING TASK

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CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS' CLASSROOM TALK SURROUNDING THE ASSIGNMENT, PRODUCTION AND EVALUATION OF A WRITING TASK

Articles and research studies arising from a process-oriented perspective on the writing act tend to exhibit three distinctive features:

1. They are de-scriptive, rather than pre-scriptive, in nature.

Concentrating their attention on writing as a "process," researchers are exploring what students are actually doing when they write rather than testing the effects of various instructional methods and other interventions (Britton, et al., 1975; Emig, 1971; Applebee, 1981).

2. They often rely upon naturalistic methods of inquiry.

Researchers are utilizing various methods of observation and interviewing as a means of charting students' progression through the stages of the writing process. Less reliance is being placed on manipulation and control of the environment with subsequent quantification of results (Graves, 1975; Kroll, 1978; Pianko, 1979).

3. They present increasing evidence to link classroom talk with the writing process.

Increasingly, educators are stressing the importance of classroom talk as a prerequisite and accompaniment to writing tasks. Observational accounts of students engaged in classroom writing activities repeatedly include instances of significant teacher-student and student-student oral interaction (Dyson, 1982; Jacobs and Karliner, 1977; Cooper and Odell, 1976; Koch, 1970).

This third feature deals with an area of concern that deserves further study. Sodowsky states that "the sooner we find out what the correlations between the way students talk and the way they write are,

the sooner we can be more effective teachers of writing."[1] Britton is convinced that "the relationship of talk to writing is central to the writing process,"[2] and educators have adopted instructional strategies based on Britton's claim (Elbow, 1973; Macrorie, 1976). Jacobs and Karliner (1977), for example, utilize teacher-student conferences to help students better reflect on their writing. During these conferences, the students engage in what the authors call "thinking talk":

> By providing an opportunity for the student to talk with an interested listener about his topic, the conference often enables the student to discover and develop ideas which may have been vague or germinal. Such talk is usually translated into more coherent, interesting and well-written papers.[3]

Few educators would question the claim that classroom talk is an important part of the learning process in schools. Informal student talk, in fact, has already become the focus of at least one major study. The Speech Communication Association recently completed an extensive research project involving the use of questionnaires and surveys to assess the nature of functional communication competencies (Allen and Brown, 1976). Members of NCTE also recognize the importance of classroom talk. Purves wrote that "The opportunity to learn resides not in the curriculum plan of a district or a school, but in the actual day-to-day transactions between teacher and student."[4] Arthur Daigon agrees, saying that "I think it is fair to describe what goes on in English classrooms as a process of sending messages and receiving messages":[5]

> The messages students send to us through their talk, writing, test taking, research papers, projects and debates tell us what gears have or have not meshed in their intellectual machinery. We find out whether

> they understand or have been appropriately moved by what they have read, heard or seen.[6]

Unfortunately, while researchers acknowledge the importance of classroom talk, they have yet to explore the link between talking and writing. The pertinent literature appearing in this area so far has been mainly anecdotal in its coverage and unsystematic in its inquiry (Koch, 1970).

Although it appears that there is every reason for educators to place great value and emphasis on classroom talk as an aid to the learning and composition process, a recent survey of "Oral Language Instruction in British Secondary Schools" indicates that this is not happening. Thomas Newkirk, the author of this survey, reported that "The greatest surprise of the study was the relative lack of informal student-initiated talk in the classroom":

> In my sample only 4% of the classes observed devoted time to group work. The Bullock Report similarly found that only a small minority of English teachers devoted time to group work.[7]

The lack of emphasis on student talk is not limited to the schools in England, but is a phenomenon occurring in the United States as well. Following her summary of the effects of the "Back-to-the-Basics" Movement on Secondary English curricula, Ritter concludes that

> the current emphasis on grammar and writing skills makes it increasingly necessary to justify speech instruction in order to assure that the subject actually is included in the language arts curriculum.[8]

Allen and Wood reach the same conclusion, noting that

> Most language arts programs focus on the development of print literacy in children. Writing and reading comprise most of the instruction, while speaking and listening are typically offered as "extras."[9]

Perhaps one reason for the de-emphasis of classroom talk is our present lack of knowledge concerning the nature and operation of this link between talking and writing. To date, few research studies have probed the nature of the relationship between oral and written discourse, although a few exploratory projects can be reported. In one study, Dyson (1981) used participant-observation methods to investigate the role of oral language in the writing efforts of pre-school children. Her study focused on the way in which students used oral communication as part of their encoding and decoding strategies. She concluded that, for the observed students, "Writing is dependent on oral language if its meaning is to be shared with others."[10] Jacobs and Karliner analyzed and evaluated transcripts of their teacher-student conferences to gain insight into ways that talk helps clarify students' ideas and improve subsequent writing attempts.

In another study, Cooper and Odell determined the extent to which published writers rely upon sound to aid them in the composing process. The researchers began their study with the notion that

> Although speech and writing constitute different modes of communication and make different demands on a communicator, there is some reason to think that the act of speaking may directly assist the act of writing.[11]

Cooper and Odell assigned their subjects several different kinds of writing tasks and subsequently conducted extensive interviews to determine how each subject went about composing his or her pieces of writing. Among their findings was the following:

> Participants in our study did not express concern for sound as "an echo to the sense;" they did not use sound as a means of, say, eliminating misplaced

> modifiers or correcting punctuation. Rather, they were concerned with the oral qualities (volume, speed, inflection) implicit in their writing and with whether those qualities were appropriate for the speaker-audience relationship they were trying to maintain in their writing.[12]

Like the other authors cited here, Cooper and Odell begin from a process-oriented perspective and employ naturalistic modes of inquiry to describe the composition process. Their research is just beginning to reveal the nature of the link between speaking and writing.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is designed to verify and elaborate upon Britton's statement that "The relationship of talk to writing is central to the writing process." This study asks the following question: "What are some characteristics of Junior High students' oral communication behavior that accompany the assignment, production and evaluation of a writing task?" The question assumes that students do utilize oral communication to help them progress through the various stages of the writing task and that understanding their oral communication behavior is therefore crucial if one wishes to understand the writing process itself.

METHOD

One method that researchers have employed in the past to gain insight into the ways students work to interpret the writing task has been to interview students after they have completed their writing. While this is a valuable and valid approach, it has its limitations. The information provided in the interview is restricted to that which can be verbalized by the student, and sometimes the student might not be able to articulate clearly or comprehensively the thought process

that he or she experienced during the pre-writing stages. In addition, the interview is one step removed from the actual occurrence of the phenomenon under study, for it usually takes place after the writing task is completed.

Participant-observation was thus believed to be a more appropriate method for exploring the research question identified earlier. The goal of this study was to gain insight into what students actually do when they write, to provide an "insightful description" of a significant aspect of the writing process. Direct observation is thus an appropriate means by which such an understanding and description may be attained.

Participant-observation methods arise out of a phenomenological perspective on the communication process. This perspective assumes that persons experience the world in uniquely different ways. People select and interpret their perceptions of events in the world, and their interpretations, in turn, influence their attitudes, behavior and communication with others. Since "the phenomenologist views human behavior--what people say and do--as a product of how people interpret their world,"[13] the phenomenological researcher, as Bogdan and Taylor point out, begins from the assumption that in order to grasp the meanings of a person's behavior, one must attempt "to see things from that person's point of view."[14] The investigator wants to generate and analyze qualitative data concerning "the actor's own frame of reference":

> The phenomenologist . . . seeks understanding through such qualitative methods as participant observation, open-ended interviewing, and personal documents. These methods yield descriptive data which enable the phenomenologist to see the world as subjects see it.[15]

The key term that characterizes this kind of research is "observation."

"To see the world as subjects see it" requires that the researcher go directly to the people involved and to the setting in which the communication phenomena under study are taking place. Once in the field, the researcher interacts with the participants and begins to gather qualitative data in the form of fieldnotes. During the data-collection phase of a participant-observation study, the researcher increasingly focuses his or her observations (becomes more selective in his or her perceptions) in response to emerging hypotheses. The process of data-analysis, occurring simultaneously with the collection of data, is described in the next section.

PROCEDURES

The fieldwork for this project was conducted in three Junior High school English classes, first in a six-month pilot study and then in a year-long period of observation. I told the classroom teachers involved that, in addition to my observing, I would be available to work with students individually and to help in other ways during the class period. In this capacity as a kind of "teacher's aide," I was able not only to observe the classroom interaction that accompanied the assigning and production of writing tasks, but also to interact directly with the students as they worked through the various stages of the composing process.

During my initial observations in the field, I monitored carefully those phenomena that appeared to attract my attention and interest. Within a month it became apparent that there were certain phenomena occurring that seemed to be of particular relevance, given my research question. I found myself concentrating on those phenomena in which one or more of the following events occurred:

1. Students talked about their writing, either to classmates or to the teacher.

2. Students wrote down ideas that arose in the course of their discussions with others (i.e., during brainstorming sessions).

3. Students asked questions of others concerning the nature of the writing task.

4. Students sought feedback from others on their writing efforts.

5. Students read their papers aloud, either to the class as a whole or to a smaller group of classmates.

The common characteristic linking these five categories of phenomena is the presence of both speaking and writing. Writing is either present as an activity or process (a student is engaged in the act of writing) or as a product (a student is reading or referring to a piece of writing).

The observed classroom sessions were devoted to a wide variety of writing tasks. Early in the semester, I observed the teacher obtaining a writing sample from the students, and subsequently observed writing activities included the drafting of a business letter, a character sketch and two papers written on the same topic but in two different ways to reflect different moods or "tone." An observed lesson on "Outlining" was also included in the first semester's activities.

The second semester I conducted observations during the presentation of a unit on Poetry and Figurative Language. I also observed the students as they completed the last part of an extensive library research project. Having collected the desired information, they were preparing to write a paper presenting their findings.

In a second class, I observed the students working in small groups to write a television script and perform their "show." Small-group work was also used for a project involving the creation and description of habits and customs of a fictional culture. The presentation of values

clarification activities that engaged the students in both oral and written work was also observed. Throughout the year, there were several observed classroom sessions devoted to the writing of short answers in response to questions presented at the end of each chapter in the students' textbook.

Interaction with students

Students approached me in different ways to initiate a conversation or conference. Sometimes a student would hand me his or her paper, asking "Would you read this?" At other times, students would simply read their papers aloud. Several times I had the opportunity to conduct brief, informal interviews with students about their writing. I asked them why they had made certain choices in their approach to the topic or why they had used certain words or phrases. On several occasions students handed me their papers and simultaneously expressed an evaluation of the writing effort at hand. In such instances, I tried to probe for the reasons behind the judgment.

Besides interviewing and consulting with students, I observed in detail the writing practices of the four or five students who sat closest to me at the back of the classroom. I was able to listen to their oral communication with their classmates, and I could hear the questions they asked and the comments they made about their own or their classmates' writing. I paid special attention to the ways in which the students initiated a conversation about their writing, the non-verbal expressions and gestures that accompanied such discussions, and the nature of the particular questions and comments. The focus and content of the students' questions were especially relevant because they revealed the students' particular concerns at that moment about their writing or the assignment at hand. My observations of and interaction with the students, then,

provided a major source of information about the students' thought processes that accompanied students' production of their writing efforts.

Writing the fieldnotes

The research setting provided me with a sometimes overwhelming amount of phenomena. At any one time, there could be occurring several conversations of brief exchanges between or among classmates, while still other students were engaged in some aspect of writing or reading. Each day of observation I brought into the classroom a small notepad on which I recorded observations. I wrote down statements made by the teacher in his giving of instructions as well as questions and comments expressed by students about their own, or their classmates' writing.

Besides recording direct statements made by students and the teacher, I recorded impressions and descriptions of students' composing, revising and evaluation behaviors. I was able to observe in detail the actions of the students sitting closest to me at the back of the room, and I tried to monitor their behavior continuously.

The actual writing of the fieldnotes occurred two to three hours after the end of each observation. Key words and phrases and quoted statements recorded on the notepad enabled me to recall the context surrounding the occurrence of the phenomenon. In this fashion, I compiled 191 pages of fieldnotes detailing my observations in the research setting.

Analyzing the fieldnotes

The analysis of the fieldnotes was an on-going process, occurring simultaneously with the writing of the notes and influencing subsequent observations. Using the "constant comparison" method of analysis, I examined each new observed phenomenon for characteristics that might link it with other phenomena already observed and recorded. The "constant comparison" method utilizes a joint coding and analysis procedure to

generate properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon. Its aim is discovery, rather than testing, of hypotheses, and can serve as an important first step in theory-building. Glaser points out that

> The constant comparative method raises the probability of achieving a complex theory which corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force consideration of much diversity in the data.[16]

The "constant comparison" method, as described by Glaser, involves following these guidelines for fieldnote analysis:

> Comparing incidents applicable to each category. The analyst starts by coding each incident in his data in as many categories of analysis as possible. To this procedure I add the basic, defining rule for the constant comparative method: while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents coded in the same category . . . . This constant comparison of the incidents very soon starts to generate theoretical properties of the category. One starts thinking in terms of the full range of types or continua of the category, its dimensions, the conditions under which it is pronounced or minimized, its major consequences, the relation of the category to other categories, and other properties of the category.
>
> Integrating categories and their properties . . . as the coding continues the constant comparative units change from comparison of incident with incident to incident with properties of the category which resulted from initial comparison of incidents.[17]

An example of the operation of the "constant comparison" method in my study may be seen in the emergence of the category "self-conscious behavior." I had observed and recorded several instances of students' behavior involving an expression of embarrassment or other emotion in relation to their language use. These instances occurred in widely divergent situations: in one case, an incident involved a student's oral remark to a classmate; at another time, a group of students exhibited non-verbal

expressions of embarrassment--giggling, hiding their faces, looking intently at each other--as their tape recording of a radio script was being played for the class. I observed several such incidents of students' communication behavior in which a common characteristic--self-conscious behavior--appeared to be present. This characteristic, then, was tentatively established as a category of behavior, and further observed instances that exhibited this characteristic were grouped under this heading. The number and kinds of incidents that accumulated in this category, when examined closely, seemed to suggest and support a hypothesis that students' self-conscious behavior arose from a tacit awareness of an intimate relationship between language and self, and that this tacit awareness accounted for the students' self-conscious behavior. In this way, hypotheses and categories of phenomena emerged over the course of the fieldwork.

CONCLUSIONS

In this section, I will identify and describe four functions of oral communication in written composition. Each of the four is a pattern or cluster of communication behaviors that emerged from classroom observations and fieldnote analysis.

Function 1: Expressing Self Through Language

Students' oral communication functioned as an expression of, and extension of, self. Students revealed in a variety of ways their awareness of this intimate relationship between one's language behavior and self-image. At one time their awareness became apparent in their self-conscious behavior displayed while a tape recording of their voices and radio script was being played for their classmates; on another occasion, a student reacted with embarrassment to a statement she had made in her role as a participant in

a group performance.

Such displays of self-conscious behavior extended as well to one's use of language in the written mode. Students attempted to prevent a piece of writing from being shared with an unintended audience; and in a group's sharing of brainstormed topics with the rest of the class, members of the group repeatedly identified certain ideas as "belonging" to themselves or to a classmate.

These incidents of students' self-conscious behavior appear to reflect a sense of "vulnerability" in their efforts to communicate. Because language is an extension of self, students feel that their self as well as their oral and written communication at hand is open to evaluation and scrutiny. Some students, in fact, were shown to have felt an excessive sense of vulnerability in their efforts to communicate. Such a degree of sensitivity led one student to feel that he as well as the idea he wished to share with the class had been rejected or disconfirmed. Another student was careful to point out that someone else had written a certain piece of writing that she had read aloud. Her action appeared to be motivated by a concern that she herself would be evaluated on the basis of the writing. Students' sense of vulnerability also accounted for their expressions of concern whenever they found themselves to be the subject of a classmate's writing.

Examples

A group of students whose tape recording of a radio script was being played for the class displayed self-conscious behaviors: they giggled, hid their faces, looked intently at each other and also appeared to be the ones paying the closest attention to the tape.

A group of students was staging its own version of the popular TV show "The Dating Game." The format of the show calls for a contestant to interview three eligible bachelors, all of whom remain hidden from the contestant's sight throughout the period of questioning. The group's performance was being videotaped by the teacher. At one point in the

dialogue, the following exchange occurred:

> M. (a male student acting as the contestant):
> "#1, do you smoke?"
>
> W. (a female student acting as Bachelor #1):
> "No, I pop pills."

W.'s line brought forth loud laughter from the audience, the other members of the class. At the same time, W. appeared to be extremely embarrassed; she laughed, hid her face in her hands; leaned forward, then backward; looked around the room at the other students; and had a very red face.

Later in the same class period, the class watched a replay of the group's performance on the television monitor. At one point W., standing near the front of the room by the monitor, responded to an incident occurring on the screen by ducking behind a friend.

Each of the students involved in the above three examples reveals his or her awareness of the intimate relationship between language behavior and self-image. This awareness is apparent through the students' self-conscious behavior occurring at a moment when their communication effort was open to evaluation by an audience. This behavior appears to arise from a real concern about how their communication effort would be received.

Students' awareness that their use of language reflected upon themselves was not restricted only to their classroom talk; rather, it extended to their use of language in the written mode as well. In the following examples, students displayed self-conscious behavior during the sharing of their writing efforts with an audience.

A student was showing a rough draft of her writing to the teacher, seeking advice and feedback. A second student suddenly approached the teacher to ask a question. The first student moved her paper from where it was lying on the desk to where the second student would not be able to read it.

A student (D.) brought me some poetry written by a classmate. D. gave me the paper to read, but told me not to read the introduction to the poem that was written at the top of the page. So strong was her desire to prevent me from reading the introduction, in fact, that she covered that particular part of the student's writing with her hand

throughout my silent reading of the poems.

In both of the above incidents, the students moved to prevent a piece of writing from being seen by an unintended audience. Their actions appear to be motivated by a sense of "vulnerability," an awareness that their (or their classmate's) writing reflects upon the writer.

A student wanted to read aloud to a classmate a limerick that had just been written by a third student during a unit on poetry. The student yelled to her friend: "Listen to this!" She then read the limerick as the author of the poem stood just behind her, looking over the reader's shoulder. As the reader approached the last line of the limerick, the author reached out, grabbed the paper and took it away. But the reader remembered the last line from having read it previously. She recited the line aloud from memory and then added: "She wrote it; I didn't."

Surely this student feels the intimate connection of language and self when she takes pains to point out the ownership of the writing lest she be "implicated" in the audience's evaluation of the author that she fears is sure to follow.

Another pattern of behavior emerged from an examination of several incidents in which one student wrote about one or more classmates. Students expressed concern whenever they found themselves to be the subject of a classmate's writing. Their expressions of concern reflected feelings of discomfort and vulnerability, as if they had suddenly been exposed to display and scrutiny.

Student F. was reading one of his classmate's papers and found that his (F.'s) name had been used in it. F. appeared bothered by this discovery and asked me "Don't you have to ask someone if you want to use their name?"

These and other observed incidents appear to support the conclusion that students are aware of the intimate relationship between language and self. This awareness reveals itself through expressions of embarrassment or concern about one's own, or a classmate's, writing. These expressions, moreover, appear to be motivated by a sense of vulnerability, a feeling

that one's self is being evaluated as well as the writing effort at hand.

Function 2: Seeking Confirmation Through Validation of Writing

Students shared their writing with others eagerly and spontaneously, engaging in this process in a variety of ways. Some students simply handed their papers without comment to a classmate. Other students chose to read their papers aloud, using their voice to help convey the intended meaning.

A motivating force behind many students' sharing encounters appears to be a desire to "validate" one's writing by providing an audience and obtaining feedback for one's written communication. Importantly, students used oral communication for this purpose. One student, for instance, was not content to simply hand me his paper to read; he took care to point out that I should be sure to notice the first part of his essay. Another student engaged in similar "validating" behavior when he directed my attention to a particular part of his writing ("This is my favorite part") and then read the excerpt aloud.

Students were also observed engaging in validating behavior before and during the act of writing. This pattern of phenomena involved students in seeking validation of their language before it became a part of their written effort. Sometimes phrases, brainstormed ideas or possible lines of dialogue for a play were expressed orally in the presence of one's classmates and their effect monitored closely.

Students' validation behavior appears to be an integral part of students' progression through the stages of the writing process, for it occurred frequently throughout the period of observation.

Through the process of validation, students are able to gauge the effectiveness of their writing. In addition, the validation process

serves to enable students to seek confirmation of self. We learned from the first function that students are tacitly aware that their language functions as an expression of self. In seeking to validate their writing, therefore, the students' ultimate purpose may be to have one's self confirmed as it is expressed in one's writing. Such appears to be the case with the student in the following example:

> A student wrote a poem, adhering to rigid structural guidelines introduced and described by the teacher at the beginning of the period. He showed his work to the teacher who leaned over the student's desk as he read it. The teacher responded, "I like it," and then walked away. The student then immediately showed his paper to a classmate sitting next to him. I saw the classmate read the poem, express some kind of response, and give the paper back to the author. The student then looked directly at me and exclaimed: "I did one. I'm proud of myself."

This student, having "validated" his paper twice, then expressed his own judgment. His expression, however, was not limited to an evaluation of the work at hand but was rather a judgment of self in the form of a feeling of pride. This and other observed examples support the hypothesis that students' desire to share their writing efforts with both classmates and teacher is motivated not only by a desire for feedback but, more importantly, by a need for approval.

Function 3: Evaluating One's Own Writing

Certain patterns emerged from the observed examples of students' oral evaluative comments about their writing efforts. One pattern of behavior indicates that students begin to evaluate their writing very early in their progression through the stages of the writing process.

> A student was beginning to draft a reply to a fictitious consumer's letter of complaint. The final copy of her paper had to be in correct business-letter form. A classmate pointed out to this student (P.) that her heading was set up incorrectly. P. immediately threw her paper away and started over.

> While observing students drafting one period, I heard a sudden, loud crumpling of paper. I turned to see H. wadding up a piece of paper. She saw me looking at her, said, "I goofed," then walked to

the wastebasket and deposited the paper. I asked her if the paper was a final copy or a draft that she was preparing. H. replied that it was a draft.

R. brought me a paper to read on which he had drafted only three lines so far. He commented briefly on the content and then asked: "Is everything spelled right?"

This early evaluation appears to rely upon a criterion of "perfection." Such a criterion seems to have been used by the student who threw away the beginning of her rough draft of a business letter when she found that her heading had been set up incorrectly. Another student also threw away her draft when she found that she had "goofed." And R. became concerned about his spelling with only three lines written so far on his rough draft.

These students' inability to tolerate mistakes made in their writing may be traced once again to their awareness of an intimate relationship between language and self. Mistakes made in one's written communication reflect upon the writer, and these students do not seem willing to suspend self-evaluation until they reach the later stages of the writing process when one edits and polishes the rough draft. Instead, behavioral evidence indicates that self-evaluation commences with the very beginning of the writing effort.

Although students readily expressed an evaluation of their writing, they appeared to be only vaguely aware of the criterion they were using as the basis for their judgment. Several students throughout the period of fieldwork brought me their paper to read and spontaneously expressed an evaluation of their writing as they handed it to me. In each case, I asked the student: "How do you know?" I continuously received the response, "I don't know." Once I received a slightly different reply. A student brought me his paper and, as he handed it to me, he engaged in the following exchange:

Student: It's pretty dumb.
Me: How do you know?
Student: Because of the way it's written.

Clues as to the criteria being employed, however, may be found in the patterns of students' oral communication behavior that accompanied such evaluations. At times, the length of the assigned writing task became a primary concern ("One hundred fifty words exactly!"). At other times, a different external criterion--the responses of their teacher and classmates--was used as the basis for students' judgment.

Students' evaluation of their writing based upon the response of others communicated a concern for approval or confirmation of self: one student was bothered because persons "laughed" at his written effort; another student expressed a sense of relief; and a third student experienced a feeling of pride. These three examples provide a pattern of setting up an external criterion of what happens to the writer as a person, rather than reflecting a concern for the rhetorical elements of invention, organization or style.

Another criterion that students appeared to be using in their evaluation of their writing efforts was the way the writing "sounded." The fact that the students in the following examples have applied the word "sounds" to their written work suggests that they are using their communication competence in the oral mode to help themselves with their work in the written mode.

A student who had written a rough draft of an assignment brought me her paper and asked: "Can you read this?" I read her paper, looked up, and was immediately asked: "Does it sound OK?"

Another student who had written a rough draft of an assignment brought me her paper and asked: "Can you read this?" . . . It doesn't sound right."

A third student gave me his paper to read, saying:

Student: Do you want to read this? . . . It's pretty stupid.
Me: How do you know?
Student: The way it sounds.

In the following example, a student used his "ear" to determine the appropriateness of a word to convey an idea in his written work. The student, drafting a horror story, asked me to suggest a word that described how a character screamed:

Me: Are you thinking of a long scream or a short one?
Student: Long.
Me: A loud scream or soft?
Student: Loud.
Me: how about "screaming hysterically"?
Student: "Hysterically"--yeah, that sounds good.

In these instances, students were using the oral mode to validate their written communication ("Yeah, that sounds good").

Thus we have seen that writing engages a concern for evaluation. The patterns identified here suggest that many students begin their evaluation as an evaluation of self even though the judgment may appear to be one of judging the writing.

Function 4: Assimilating the Writing Task to One's Own Understanding

In his report of his descriptive research on the development of students' writing abilities, James Britton emphasizes that an essential part of the writing process involves a student in "assimilating" the writing task "to his understanding." One assimilates a writing task by "explaining the matter to oneself--and that is a highly idiosyncratic affair."[18] Britton and his colleagues elaborate on the need for--and the "idiosyncratic" nature of--this assimilation process:

> getting hold of information is not such a simple operation as is implied by that expression (or its equivalents--"acquiring" concepts, "grasping" ideas, etc.). Information is not just taken on like cargo. Nor is it like being given something, as if now you have something where before you had nothing . . . when information is received it doesn't drop into an empty pigeonhole but comes up against what is there

> already--namely, other knowledge, more or less clear and explicit, and a process has to occur of marrying the new with the old. The new may be interpreted in the light of the old or the old may be modified to take account of the new.[19]

Throughout my fieldwork, I repeatedly observed the assimilation process in students' oral communication behavior. Students used their classroom talk to help themselves interpret, or make sense of, the writing task at hand. Their assimilation strategies involved requests for examples or the re-statement of the instructions in their own words. Sometimes these re-statements consisted of the definition of a word or the giving of an example. This strategy of re-statement appears to help students understand what is being asked of them by allowing students, in Britton's words, to "marry the new with the old" information.

The students had just read a short story and were being presented with an activity designed to help them discover ways in which the main character's traits were revealed to the reader. The teacher directed the students to make a chart consisting of two columns, with the headings "Stated" and "Implied." The students were told to identify passages in the story that revealed aspects of the character's personality and to decide how these traits were revealed--by the author's direct statement or by the character's statements or actions. Then the students were to write down in the appropriate column a word that summarized this trait ("hostile," "disrespectful," etc.). One student raised his hand at the conclusion of the teacher's explanation of the assignment and asked: "'Implied'--does that mean 'what he (the character) does'?" The teacher's response: "Yes."

An assignment was introduced in which students were directed to write two papers about a single topic. One paper was to reflect an "optimistic" tone in dealing with the subject, and the other was to display a distinctly negative attitude. The teacher included in his explanation of the assignment some examples to illustrate the difference between an "optimistic" and a "pessimistic" attitude. The teacher concluded his explanation to the class by asking if there were further questions. One student raised his hand and said: "Like . . . (tried unsuccessfully to paraphrase the directions; finally said) I don't get it."

In their questions directed to the teacher about the assignments, students often used such phrases as "Do we have to . . . ?" "Should we . . . ?" and "Are we supposed to . . . ?" These particular ways of phrasing the questions reflect students' perception that the primary

audience for their writing would be the teacher-as-evaluator.

Often students explained parts or all of the assignment at hand in response to a classmate's request for such information. In some of these explanations, students used non-verbal communication in the form of hand gestures and used the two verbs "say" and "write" interchangeably ("First you say . . . ").

Students engaged in assimilation behavior at different times during their progression through the stages of the writing process, not just during the teacher's introductory explanation of the writing task at hand. A pattern of behavior emerged to reveal that students' turning of their attention to the demands involved in the assignment occurred suddenly and briefly, sometimes at inappropriate moments. Students who had not understood or listened to the initial directions given by the teacher would suddenly express a desire to find out "what's going on" or to ask a question about a particular concern. These expressions, when they occurred, would at times interrupt the teacher's explanation or disrupt other classroom proceedings. Like the shutter on a camera, students' readiness to assimilate a point or a procedure would "flash" suddenly and express itself strongly.

The class was correcting a homework assignment in which students had filled in the comparative and superlative forms of given words. Given the word "dull," for instance, students listed the words "duller" and "dullest." The teacher stood at the front of the room, calling on individuals for their answers to the words listed in the textbook exercise. At one point, the teacher mentioned that a certain word was an "adjective." The following exchange then occurred:

> Student: (raising her hand) What's an "adjective"?
> Teacher: You should have learned that already.
> Student: Well, could you tell me <u>now</u>?

The teacher responded with a comment to the effect that "We'll have to cover that later," and then continued with the correcting of the homework exercise. The student's concern remained unanswered throughout the remainder of the period that day.

One should note that the student's question above revealed that (1) the student had not yet assimilated the term, even though she was supposed to "have learned that already," and that (2) she was indicating her desire and readiness to learn the meaning of the term at this moment.

The teacher wished to give students a source of ideas that might be used in the writing of their playscripts in small groups. He passed out several copies of Read magazine and directed the students to summarize any two stories or articles they read. A dittoed sheet of instructions for this exercise and for the subsequent writing of the play-script was also handed out. At the beginning of the period on the second day of students' reading and summarizing activity, a student turned to a classmate and exclaimed: "There's nothing in these books to summarize about. (Pause) What are we supposed to do?"

Observed examples of students' classroom talk in this study surrounding their attempts to interpret the assigned writing tasks confirm Britton's observation that the process of assimilation is "a highly idiosyncratic affair." We have seen that the process occurs at different times and in different ways for each student.

DISCUSSION

An evaluative theme appears in many of the patterns of students' classroom talk in this study. Students revealed a concern for an evaluation of their work and expressed this concern in a variety of ways. Students turned to others--both classmates and teacher--for clarification of instructions and for evaluation and approval of their work. Through their assimilation and sharing behavior, students revealed their concern with such questions as "Is this right?" "Is this good?" "Is this what he (the teacher) wants?" "Is this what I'm suppoed to do?"

A prominent aspect of students' evaluation behavior involved their seeking an audience and feedback for their writing. The students engaged in this activity spontaneously and frequently throughout the period of observation. Their attempts to validate their writing served several

purposes: it allowed the writer to gauge the effectiveness of his or her work; it served as a means to seek confirmation of self through audience approval of the written effort; and it helped students to cope with the "context-free" nature of written communication. For several students in this study, the process of validation served as an integral part of their progression through the production and evaluation stages of writing.

Another characteristic of much of students' classroom talk was students' sensitivity toward their language use. The students observed during the fieldwork expressed pride, embarrassment, and concern about their writing. These expressions seemed to arise when the students' communication suddenly and momentarily was the subject of classmates' attention and judgment. At such times, some of the students involved appeared uncomfortable or tense.

Often there occurred an interaction between students' concern for evaluation and their sensitivity to language use. In such instances, the students involved encountered a dilemma. To seek an audience and feedback for one's writing required that one allow the writing to become the focus of another person's attention and judgment. Some of the patterns of students' validation behavior identified earlier, then, may represent strategies utilized by the students to obtain feedback while minimizing the "risk" involved in such an encounter. One such strategy involved students in making the act of validation an integral part of their composing behavior. One group of students, for example, "tried out" possible lines of dialogue on each other, gauging their effect before adding them to the script they were writing. This pattern of "composing aloud" in the presence of others allowed students to "test" their ideas before committing them to writing.

Other students, also faced with a desire to share their communication effort but mindful of the self-revelatory nature of their work, took pains to direct their audience's attention to specific parts of the writing ("This is my favorite part"). While some students shared their writing by simply handing it without comment to the teacher or a classmate to read, others chose to share their papers by reading them aloud to their intended audience. The students who chose to read their papers aloud were able to retain some control over the effect of their writing by giving their words appropriate inflection and interpretation with their voice. Simply handing their papers to an audience, on the other hand, meant relinquishing control of another's response, allowing the reader to make his or her own interpretation without benefit of the author's non-verbal cues. For several students in this study, then, the validation process, accomplished through classroom talk, served as a strategy to reconcile two elements, a desire to obtain an audience and feedback, and a sensitivity toward one's language use.

The interpersonal dimension, then, is an integral part of the writing process. Students turned to others for information, clarification, evaluation, and approval at all stages of their work on a writing task.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Some of the sharing procedures currently in use for dealing with students' writing (especially Elbow's and Macrorie's approaches) were being reflected, apparently spontaneously, in the students' informal sharing and validation behavior observed in this study. Students demonstrated a concern about how their writing "sounded" and its effect on their audience. The frequency and spontaneity of students' sharing behavior observed in this study stands in marked contrast to the absence of any mention of the sharing process in four current, representative composition

textbooks as reviewed by Golub (1983). For the students in this study, the process of sharing and validation were integral parts of students' progression through the production and evaluation stages of the assigned task. In the composition textbooks, however, no provision is made for the sharing of students' writing done on any of the assigned topics.

The evaluation behavior of students observed in this study may also have implications for current classroom instruction. Several students evaluated their writing almost as soon as they began their draft. Yet, Elbow and other educators concerned with the development of fluency in writing recommend that one suspend evaluation during the early stages of composing. For the observed students, the tendency to merge the four stages of writing into one stage through early evaluative behavior may be a formidable obstacle to overcome. An instructional strategy might be needed that allows these students to experience the characteristics and dynamics of the drafting stage with its drive toward fluency of thought in a non-judgmental atmosphere. Both "free-writing" and journal writing exercises may be appropriate in this regard, for they are designed to develop fluency in a climate free of critical appraisal. Their use may help overcome one's tendency to be critical of one's effort in the drafting stage and can thus counter students' tendencies to merge the four stages of the writing process into one.

The criteria that these students used in their evaluative judgments were vague and diverse. Neither the teachers' instructions nor the current composition textbooks emphasized this aspect of assigned writing tasks. Given the importance that students in this study attach to their own evaluative judgment, it seems that the identification of appropriate criteria to be used for assigned writing tasks is an element of composition instruction that may deserve increased attention.

Among the most important instances of students' oral communication behavior are those occurring as part of the assimilation process, the means by which students interpret the demands of the assignment and decide how satisfactorily they have completed the task. Students' assimilation behavior in this study was characterized by interpersonal communication encounters--requests made of the teacher or classmates for clarification, and examples and explanations given by one student to another. The ways in which students made sense of the assigned writing task--through examples and the "translating" of the instructions into their own words (paraphrasing)--may have implications for instructional strategies aimed at the pre-writing stage of composition. The observed students demonstrated a desire to hear from others and to talk with others about the assignment. Even students' display of "intentionality"--their deliberate turning of their attention to the task at hand--was signaled by oral communication encounters involving a request for information or clarification.

This interpersonal dimension of students' assimilation efforts is not currently being addressed or emphasized by present composition methods. For example, concerning the ways in which teachers introduced new writing assignments to the class, Applebee (1981) reported that "In the observational studies, the amount of time devoted to prewriting activities averaged just over three minutes." He continues:

> That included everything from the time the teacher began introducing the topic until the first student began to write. Those three minutes were spent writing the essay topic on the board, or passing out and reading through a dittoed assignment sheet, followed by student questions about task dimensions: "How long does it have to be?" "Can I write in pencil?" "Do I <u>have</u> to do this?"[20]

The frequency and variety of students' assimilation behavior observed in

the present study indicates that an increase in the amount of pre-writing discussion of the topic might be appropriate. This instructional strategy, however, as reported by Applebee, is not being widely utilized in current published approaches to composition instruction.

There appears to be a discrepancy between the operation of an interpersonal dimension of students' composing efforts identified in this study and the lack of provision for, or emphasis of, this dimension in current composition instructional methods. Students in this study turned to their classmates or the teacher for assimilation, validation, and evaluation purposes. Current composition textbooks, on the other hand, do not devote much space or attention to pre-writing activities, nor do they identify appropriate criteria for evaluation of the assigned writing task or encourage the discussion of student papers. Elbow's and Macrorie's approach to the sharing of students' writing represents a trend toward the acknowledgment of the existence and operation of the interpersonal dimension involved in the writing process as displayed by the students in this study. Additional, pertinent instructional strategies may be called for as further insights into the interpersonal aspect of students' composing behavior are uncovered.

LIMITATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The conclusions and implications arising from the findings of this study are limited in their applicability to other classrooms and other student populations. This limitation in scope and generalizability is due to the presence of three factors: (1) the potentially idiosyncratic nature of the classrooms and curriculum observed; (2) the contextual dependency of the observed and recorded phenomena; (3) the "subjectivity" of the research method.

The findings of this research project, however, are valuable for three reasons: first, they illumine features of students' classroom talk--a complex phenomenon--as it is spoken in three classrooms. Insights into this talk have been obtained by observing it in its real-life setting. The present study extends the trend toward naturalistic classroom research by employing a relatively non-obtrusive means of observation to examine the phenomenon of interest as it occurs for a specific group of students in a classroom. The result is a detailed description of the phenomenon under study, as it occurred, without investigator manipulation, in the normal setting and on the normal occasions of its everyday occurrence.

Second, the findings of this study illustrate the value of participant-observation for the study of communication in classroom instruction. The use of participant-observation in this study has enabled the writer to gain insights into a previously unexamined subject, the interpersonal dimension involved in students' composing and evaluating.

Finally the findings of this study are valuable because they generate questions that deserve to be explored further by other research methods in other contexts. The findings reveal the operation of an additional, interpersonal element involved in the writing process and open the way for subsequent explorations of this phenomenon.

NOTES

[1] Roland E. Sodowsky, "Freshman Speech, Freshman Writing: A Linguistic Comparison," ERIC (ED 144 099), p. 10.

[2] James Britton et al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education, 1975), p. 29.

[3] Suzanne E. Jacobs and Adela B. Karliner, "Helping Writers to Think: The Effect of Speech Roles in Individual Conferences on the Quality of Thought in Student Writing," College English, 38 (Jan. 1977), 489.

[4] Alan Purves, "Priorities for Research in English Education," Research in the Teaching of English, 10 (Spring 1976), 62.

[5] Arthur Daigon, "An English for All Seasons," ERIC (ED 151 789), p. 7.

[6] Ibid., p. 8.

[7] Thomas Newkirk, "Oral Language Instruction in British Secondary Schools," Communication Education, 26 (Sept. 1977), 277.

[8] Ellen M. Ritter, "'Back to Basics' and Accountability:Issues in Secondary School Speech Education," Communication Education, 27 (March 1978), 120.

[9] R. R. Allen and Barbara Sundene Wood, "Beyond Reading and Writing to Communication Competence," Communication Education, 27 (Nov. 1978), 286.

[10] Anne Dyson, "The Role of Oral Language in Early Writing Processes," speech delivered at the convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Washington D.C., 1982.

[11] Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, "Consideration of Sound in the Composing Process of Published Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 10 (Fall 1976), 103.

[12] Ibid., p. 114.

[13] Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), p. 13.

[14] Ibid., p. 14.

[15] Ibid., p. 2.

[16] Barney G. Glaser, "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis," in Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader, ed. George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 226.

[17] Ibid., pp. 221-22.

[18] Britton et al., p. 28.

[19] James Britton et al., From Information to Understanding: What Children Do with New Ideas (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976), p. 13.

[20] Arthur N. Applebee, Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1981), p. 74.

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